XXIX The Battle of Hamburger Hill
Battle Command in Difficult Terrain Against a Determined Enemy

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The Vietnam conflict wore many faces. It was at once an insurrection by indigenous guerrilla forces and an invasion by the regular army of a neighboring regime. It was a war of snipers and ambushes, booby traps and pitched battles. The location of the fighting ranged from the densely inhabited rice basket of the Mekong Delta to the remote, jungled mountains of the Central Highlands, It included both platoon-level "pacification" efforts aimed at small bands of Vietcong and corps-level operations targeted against main-force North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments and divisions. One would be hard-pressed to identify the typical battle command experience in this long and confusing war. But while there was no "typical" experience, current-day military leaders may find some aspects of the fighting in Vietnam instructive and relevant to today's challenges. This study concentrates on a "big battle" of that war. Some historians may dismiss what have been called the '"big battles" of Vietnam as largely irrelevant in a war supposedly aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. U.S. Army leaders, however, recognized that a viable pacification campaign in the shadow of main force NVA regiments was impossible. The big battles of the Vietnam War are still relevant today because, in many ways, they foreshadowed the current American miIitary's technological paradigm. U.S. military forces in Vietnam. held a clear technological advantage over their Communist foes, just as America's current-day military counts on a technological edge against its potential enemies. In the Vietnam War, American military leaders hoped to parlay their technological superiority into quick victories at a low human cost. They tried to do this by pinpointing the enemy's forces, isolating them from support, hamstringing their maneuver capability, and finally, smothering them with overwhelming firepower. In January and February 1991, American-led coalition forces did just that in the Gulf War. But when their predecessors tried to do much the same thing in western Vietnam in May 1969, the enemy and the terrain proved intractable.

This essay will examine how a determined enemy and brutally difficult terrain combined to negate the effects of American technology and presented a dramatic challenge to a U.S. Army commander's battle command skills. The battle took place on Dong Ap Bia (Ap Bia Mountain) in the rugged, jungle-shrouded mountains along the Laotian border of South Vietnam. Rising from the floor of the western A Shau Valley, Ap Bia Mountain is a looming, solitary massif, unconnected to the ridges of the surrounding Annamite range. It dominates the northern valley, towering some 937 meters above sea level. Snaking down from its highest peak Studies in Battle Command are a series of ridges and fingers, one of the largest extending southeast to a height of 900 meters, another reaching south to a 9 1 g-meter peak. The entire mountain is a rugged, uninviting wilderness blanketed in double- and triple-canopy jungle, dense thickets of bamboo, and waist-high elephant

grass. Local Montagnard tribesmen called Ap Bia "the mountain of the crouching beast." Lieutenant Colonel Weldon Honeycutt, commander of the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry (the "Rakkasans"), called it '"Hill 937." The soldiers who fought there dubbed it "Hamburger Hill."' The fight on Hamburger Hill occurred during Operation Apache Snow, the second part of a three-phased campaign intended to destroy NVA bases in the treacherous A Shau Valley.3 This campaign was the latest in a long series of attempts to neutralize the A Shau, which proved a persistent thorn in the side of the previous Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV} commander, General William C. Westmoreland. Each effort met with results ranging in degree from ineffectual to disastrous. Lieutenant General Richard Stilwell, commander of XXIV Corps, resolved to succeed with his operation, however, and amassed almost two divisions of infantry and a daunting array of air power to ensure victory. Leading the attack were five infantry battalions under Major General Melvin Zais, commander of the legendary 10lst Airborne (Airmobile) Division. Three units were American (the 1/506th, 2/50ist, and 3/187th Infantry and two came from the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division (the 2/l& and 4/1st ARVN). Colonel Joseph Conmy, commander of the 3d Brigade of the I0lst Airborne, controlled the main effort. He characterized the operation as a reconnaissance in force (RIF). His plan called for each of the five battalions to "combat assault" into the valley by helicopter on 10 May 1969 and to comb its assigned sector for enemy troops and supplies, If a battalion made heavy contact with the NVA, Conmy would reinforce it with one of the other units. In theory, the Americans, utilizing helicopters, could reposition their forces quickly enough to keep the enemy from massing on any one unit. Conversely, an American force discovering an NVA unit would fix it while the reinforcing battalion flew in to cut off the enemy's retreat and destroy him. Unfortunately, practice does not always realize theory.

The American and South Vietnamese units participating in Apache Snow knew, based on existing intelligence and previous experiences in the A Shau, that they were in for a tough fight. Beyond that, however, they had little evidence as to the enemy's actual strength and dispositions. Masters of camouflage, the NVA completely concealed their bases from aerial surveillance. When the NVA moved, they did so at night along trails covered by triple-canopy jungle, again confounding observation from above. They effected their command and control mainly by runner and wire, leaving no electronic signature for the Americans to monitor or trace. Technology, therefore, provided scant assistance to the American battalion commander trying to '(see the enemy" during Apache Snow. He had to generate his own tactical intelligence. Patrols, captured equipment, installations, documents, and occasionally prisoners provided combat commanders with the raw data from which to draw their assessment of the enemy order of battle and dispositions. Gathering this information took time, though. Moreover, intelligence about the enemy's strength and dispositions did not necessarily illuminate his commander's intent. It took days to ascertain this, and the learning experience proved decidedly unpleasant. for the Americans, At first, the battle went deceptively well. The American and South Vietnamese units experienced only light enemy contact on the first day. But documents captured by Lieutenant Colonel Honeycutt's 3487th Infantry indicated that the entire 29th NVA Regiment, nicknamed the "Pride of Ho Chi Minh," was some-where in the A Shau Valley. Moreover, intelligence indicated that the enemy was looking for a big fight

Honeycutt was eager to oblige. Past experience indicated the enemy would resist violently for a short time and then withdraw as the Americans brought overwhelming firepower to bear against him. This was a familiar pattern in many of the larger encounters with the NVA and in the previous A Shau battles. The big battles, such as Dak To and Ia Drang, where the enemy offered prolonged, determined resistance, were rare.' Considering this, Honeycutt anticipated his battalion would be able to handle whatever he found on Hill 937. As insurance, he prudently requested and received the brigade's reserve, his own Bravo Company. He intended to find the NVA force located in his part of the valley and punish it before it could escape into Laos.

On 11 May, Honeycutt dispersed his Rakkasans and scoured the vicinity to the north and northwest of Ap Bia Mountain. His men swept west toward the nearby Laotian border and south up the north slope of the mountain itself. When Bravo Company made heavy contact with some NVA late in the day, Honeycutt responded quickIy by directing Cobra helicopter gunships, known as aerial rocket artillery CARA), to support a hasty assault. Unfortunately, in the heavy jungle, the Cobras mistook the battalion command post for an NVA unit and attacked and killed two Americans and wounded thirty-five, including Honeycutt himself. The fratricide incident temporarily eliminated all battalion command and control of the battle and forced 3/l 87th to withdraw into night defensive positions. Bravo Company was separated from its objective, the summit of Dong Ap Bia, by less than 1,000 meters. The incident confirmed what Huneycutt already suspected, that there was an enemy force on the mountain, However, the contact was serious enough for him to adjust his estimate of the enemy's strength from "a few trail watchers" to a reinforced platoon or even a company.' The Rakkasans could still deal with a force that size, but they would have to concentrate to do so.

For the next three days, Honeycutt fought the mountain and the NVA to bring his scattered companies together for a coordinated battalion attack. Despite the fact that, since the initial assault, no company was more than about 1,500 meters from the crest of the mountain, it took two days to consolidate the battalion for a three-company assault. Time and again, the American infantrymen found themselves hampered as much by the topography as by the enemy. The rugged terrain slowed dismounted movement to a crawl. Between I2 and 14 May, for example, Delta Company was virtually immobilized when it went down a steep ravine and was caught there by the enemy. In one grueling five-hour period, the company labored to advance a total of only 500 meters." The steep, mud-covered slopes, more than the enemy, kept this company from fulfilling Honeycutt's intent. In the end, the troops had to abandon their attack and withdraw the way they had come. These three days were a period of intensely unpleasant "discovery learning" for Honeycutt and his men. Map reconnaissance and helicopter over flights did not indicate that his initial scheme of maneuver was impractical. It took Delta Company's three-day ordeal to do so. Though Honeycutt had a long and distinguished record as a combat commander in both Vietnam and Korea, be underestimated Ap Bia Mountain and the NVA facing him. Although his estimate of the enemy strength was incorrect, his miscalculation was not immediately apparent to him or to any of the American leadership. It took three days of assaults by Bravo and Charlie Companies, each bloodily repulsed, before the situation became clearer. The enemy was stronger than anticipated, much stronger than company strength, and he grew more powerful every night as he received reinforcements from Laos. The NVA commander's demonstrated

tenacity and willingness to replace heavy losses indicated he intended to put up a stiff fight for Hill 937. By 13 May, it had become clear to the brigade commander, Conmy, that Ap Bia Mountain contained more NVA than tbe 3/187th Infantry could handle alone. At midday, he decided to send 1/506th Infantry (the Currahees) north from their RIF area of operations to assist Honeycutt. This action conformed to the American tactic of maneuvering an uncommitted battalion to support a battalion in heavy contact.

Hoping to cut off enemy reinforcements to Dong Ap Bia, Conmy ordered the to attack north, cross-country, to hit the NVA facing Honeycutt from the rear. Starting from positions that were only about 4,800 meters fi-om Hill 937, Conmy could have reasonably expected the Currahees to be ready to provide support to 3/187th Infantry no later than the morning of 15 May. Yet it took 1/506th Infantry five and a half days, until 19 May, to reach Honeycutt. By the standards of dismounted movement routinely practiced by today's light infantry at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), l/506th Infantry's pace was glacial In one forty-hour period over 13-14 May, the battalion was able to cover only 1,500 of the 4,000 meters separating it from its objective on Ap Bia Mountain. Rough terrain and ever-present enemy snipers made the difference. Conmy and the 11506th Infantry, like Honeycutt, learned the hard way that Ap Bia Mountain and the enemy on it defied previous experience.

Treacherous terrain and an enemy that knew how to exploit it continuallly threw off the tempo of American tactical operations at Hamburger Hill. Both airborne infantry battalions were "ground-bound"' in the jungle, maneuvering at the pace of their foot soldiers. Not even the helicopter, the transcendent theme of American technological superiority in this war, offered much hope of speeding up maneuver. Steep gradients and dense vegetation provided few natural landing zones in the vicinity of the mountain. The rugged terrain also masked the NVA positions, making it nearly impossible to suppress enemy air defense fires. Throughout the battle, unseen WA soldiers maneuvered in the jungle around the American landing zones and shot down or damaged numerous helicopters with small arms fire and even rocket-propelled grenades. In fact, the dense terrain covered the movement of enemy forces so completely that it created the effect of a nonlinear battlefield. The NVA continuously slipped behind the American lines, hitting logistical support landing zones (LZs) and command posts (CPs) no less than four times. This problem caused each company and battalion commander to leave a substantial portion of his force in the rear to cover his LZ and CP and ensure the flow of supplies, the evacuation of casualties, and uninterrupted command and control. In addition to securing their LZs, attacking companies had to provide for 360-degree security as they maneuvered, since the terrain prevented them from mutually supporting each other until the final assaults on the mountain. Even so, time and again, NVA platoon- and company-size elements struck maneuvering American forces from the flanks and rear as the Rakkasans and Currahees directed their attention toward the mountain top.

The effectiveness of U.S. maneuver forces was further constrained by the narrow trails along which the Americans advanced through heavy vegetation. For much of the battle, each of the attacking American companies assaulted on a squad or platoon front. Thus, at the point of attack, American squads and platoons frequently faced NVA platoons and companies. To overcome this firepower disparity, the American infantrymen traditionally responded with artillery and close air support. With most small arms engagements on

Hamburger Hill limited to tens of meters, however, American indirect fire support was severely restricted. Often, the enemy was too close and the situation too fluid for units in contact to get timely, accurate supporting fires. In close combat, American infantrymen had to succeed with their own direct fires or, as frequently happened on Ap Bia, pull back and await artillery, close air support, and ABA. Even then, there was no guarantee that the artillery and close air would do the job. The dense jungle and wild, irregular contours of Ap Bia served to dampen the effects of American fire support. NVA bunkers were well sited to take advantage of these. contours and the jungle cover. Furthermore, bunkers were well built, with substantial overhead cover that withstood days of pounding. Over time, US. bombs and napalm stripped away the foliage and exposed the WA's bunkers. But they were so numerous and so well constructed that they could not be destroyed by indirect firepower alone. * 2 Napalm and infantry recoilless rifle fire proved to be the weapons of choice for busting the bunkers.

Under these fluid conditions, battle command was decidedly decentralized. Though Honeycutt constantly prodded his company commanders to push on, he could to do little to direct their tactics as they fought through the jungle. Only in the closing days of the battle, when his companies maneuvered in close proximity over the barren mountain top, was he able to coordinate mutual support among his subordinates. Fire support for units in contact with the enemy was also decentralized. Artillery, ABA, and close air support (with airborne forward air controller [FAC] assistance) were responsive to units down to platoon level. Yet in the evolving, often confusing, maneuver battle, it was inevitable that command and control of supporting fires suffered. Fighting on Ap Bia Mountain produced no less than five incidents of air-to-ground fratricide over a ten-day period. Pilots (and sometimes the FACs) were unable to distinguish friend from enemy in the intense and confusing fighting around the mountain In at least one incident, the pilots themselves became lost and attacked more than a kilometer off their intended target. 14

On 14 and 15 May, Honeycutt launched two coordinated battalion attacks against Ap Bia Mountain. Each day, he expected support from 1/506th Infantry, and when it failed to appear, he attacked alone. Honeycutt rightly believed that each day he left the North Vietnamese undisturbed on the mountain gave them more time to improve their defenses. Nevertheless, both attacks failed. Although Honeycutt's Bravo Company attacked to within 150 meters of the summit, enemy fire, steep terrain, and rain combined to force the Rakkasans back down the slope. On 16 May, 1/506th Infantry attacked north toward Bong Ap Bia but was stopped after seizing Hi11 916-still some 2,000 meters from its objective. With the two battalions so far out of supporting distance, the brigade commander ordered Honeycutt to wait for 1/506th Infantry.

About the same time l/506th Infantry attacked, the 10lst Airborne Division commander, Zais, experienced a new and uncomfortable aspect of battle command-one with which modern commanders have become increasingly familiar. The Associated Press "discovered" the battle at Ap Bia and sent correspondent Jay Sharbutt to investigate it on the ground. Sharbutt met with Zais and, in the course of the interview, challenged his decision to prosecute the battle.15 Zais answered Sharbutt's questions politely and honestly, but the journalist was not satisfied. His subsequent newspaper accounts of "Hamburger Hill" stirred up a storm of controversy that swept the nation and resounded

in the halls of Congress. For the next four days, more and more journalists poured into the base camps, firebases, headquarters, and landing zones supporting the battle. Commanders found they had a new and largely unwelcome duty: conducting public relations while also fighting a battle.

The next day, 17 May, I/506th Infantry attacked again but made little progress. Although the Currahees were still almost 1,500 meters from the top of Ap Bia Mountain, the brigade commander ordered a coordinated two-battalion assault for 18 May. With 1/506th Infantry attacking from the south and 3/187th Infantry attacking from the north, he hoped the enemy would not be able to concentrate against either battalion. Fighting to within seventy-five meters of the summit, Delta Company, 3087th Infantry, almost realized Conmy's wish. Unfortunately, with every officer in the company killed or wounded and over 50 percent casualties, the battle degenerated into an uncontrollable brawl, with NVA and GIs exchanging small arms and grenade fire within twenty meters of each other. Honeycutt committed three companies into the fray, coordinating their movements from a light observation helicopter. As they prepared for the final assault, however, a roaring thunderstorm washed over the battlefield, reduced visibility to nothing, and caused all firing to stop. Unable to advance in the torrential rains on a battlefield turned into a quagmire, the Rakkasans reluctantly withdrew down the mountain again. The 1/506th Infantry met with heavy opposition for the first time in the battle, but its three converging companies managed nonetheless to get to about 1,2QO meters of the top of Dong An Bia.

In view of the heavy casualties already sustained in the battle, Zais seriously considered stopping the attack on Dong An Bia. Although he was under great pressure from the unwanted attention of the press, he decided to continue the fight. Both his corps commander Lieutenant General Stilwell and the MACV commander, General Creighton Abrams, backed him. He decided to commit three fresh battalions-the 2/501st Infantry, 2/3d Infantry (1st ARVN Division), and 2/501st Infantry, The 3/187th Infantry's casualties to this point were staggering. Not counting replacements, Alpha and Bravo Companies had lost 50 percent of their original strength, while Charlie and Delta Companies had lost 80 percent. Furthermore, two of the four original company commanders were casualties, as well as eight of twelve platoon Leaders. 17 Considering these crippling losses, Zais initially decided to relieve the 3/187th Infantry with the 2/506th Infantry Honeycutt, however, demanded that Zais allow the Rakkasans to take the mountain, and the division commander relented.18

The Americans launched the final attack on Dong Ap Bia on the morning of20 May 1969. The Rakkasans had been reinforced with a company from 2/506th Infantry and the division had airmobiled two additional battalions onto the battle field. Ten days after the battle had begun, the 10lst Airborne Division finally brought overwhelming combat power to bear against the NVA. The attack began with two hours of close air support and ninety minutes of artillery prep fires. Four battalions attacked simultaneously, and within two hours, 3/l 87th Infantry became the first battalion to reach the top of Ap Bia. Some of the enemy chose to flee, but many fought in their bunkers to the end. The 3/l 87th Infantry finally secured Hilt 937 about 1700 on 20 May.

The ten day Battle of Hamburger Hill had cost 70 American dead and 372 wounded. To take the position, the Americans eventually committed five infantry battalions, about

1,800 men, and ten artillery batteries. 20 In addition, the U.S. Air Force flew 272 attack sorties and expended more than 1 million pounds of bombs and 152,000 pounds of napalm. 21 This massed firepower took a devastating toll on the NVA. The 7th and 8th Battalions of the 29th NVA Regiment were virtually wiped out. Over 630 dead NVA were discovered on and around the battlefield and many more undoubtedly covered the trails and draws leading back into Laos. 22 Yet the repercussions of the battle were more political than military. Questions raised by the press concerning the necessity of the battle stirred controversy for weeks after the fighting stopped. These issues flared up again when the 101 st Airborne quietly abandoned the hill to the enemy in June. Eventually, the investigation into the Battle of Hamburger Hill reached Congress and led to a reappraisal of American strategy in Vietnam.

The Battle of Hamburger Hill was fought twenty-six years ago. Over the intervening time, the U.S. Army has changed a great deal. Its doctrine, equipment, and organization have developed to support a rapidly evolving mission. Modern day commanders, nonetheless, can still glean some important insights from the Battle of Hamburger Hill. To be successful in such operations, commanders must see the enemy, themselves, and the terrain in order to visualize the successful conduct of the battle. On Dong Ap Bia, the rugged terrain clouded the American commanders' abilities to see themselves and their enemy. For a commander to see himself on the battlefield, he has to be able to do more than merely track the locations of friendly units. A commander must know how his unit (or units) will behave on the battlefield, and he must understand how the impact of terrain changes the way his unit or units operate. The tortuous terrain of Dong Ap Bia reduced light infantry maneuver to a crawl The 1/50&h Infantry spent five days en route to support 3087th Infantry, a move the 3d Brigade initially expected to take one day. SimilarIy, Delta Company, 3/187th, spent two days trapped in a ravine, which delayed the concentration of Honeycutt's combat power. Besides reducing ground maneuver, the terrain practically negated the tactical advantage of the lift helicopter. Up until the end of the battle, helicopter operations around Dong Ap were hazardous in the extreme. It was not until 19 May, when most of the NVA had been killed or driven up the summit of the mountain that helicopters were used to position the reinforcing battalions tactically. Besides hampering the commander's ability to predict his unit% performance on the battlefield, the dense terrain made it difficult to know the enemy. While the Americans knew an NVA regiment was in the A Shau Valley, the densely jungled terrain concealed the fact that the enemy had up to two entire battalions on the mountain itself. Actual enemy strength on Ap Bia was only confirmed by military intelligence on 18 May, long after Zais realized that there were too many enemy for 3/187th Infantry to handle without support. The privilege of learning that hard fact was paid for in the blood of the Rakkasans as they fought alone between 11 and 16 May. The difficulty in making this intelligence assessment was multiplied by the fact that the enemy used the terrain ta mask his flow of supplies and reinforcements onto the mountain every night until the end of the battle.

The terrain also affected the enemy's tactics on the battlefield. It masked his movements, forcing the Americans to disperse their forces for all-round security. The WA adapted their defensive tactics to maximize these terrain benefits. They probed American positions nightly and conducted several deadly sapper attacks on American night

defensive positions (and a firebase). And they used the terrain to conceal their bypassed units, which subsequently attacked the Americans in the flanks and rear with disastrous effect. These counterattacks were all the more devastating when they were made against U.S. units that were pinned down by hundreds of carefully prepared bunkers and fighting positions. Hidden in the folds of the mountain, the bunkers were sited to thwart the accuracy and effectiveness of American air and fire support.

American tactics in Vietnam relied on overwhelming firepower--chiefly close air support, artillery, and ARA-to reduce friendly casualties while overcoming the enemy's advantage in numbers and, in some cases, dismounted maneuver. But while fire support contributed significantly to the victory at Dong Ap Bia, it proved a two-edged sword. Although American firepower created staggering enemy casualties and limited his ability to mass maneuver forces, preparatory fires seldom neutralized the WA positions. The dense jungle and the sharp relief of the hill attenuated the concentration of firepower, as did the enemy's weIl-prepared defenses. Honeycutt also held that ARA was chiefly responsible for crippling two U.S. attacks that might have succeeded based on the courage and gallantry shown by the ground maneuver forces.

Ultimately the Battle of Hamburger Hill proved that the key ingredient in successful battle command is the commander himself. At Dong Ap Bia, Honeycutt met a highly skilled enemy in unexpected numbers who displayed unprecedented determination to fight. This enemy had carefully chosen the battlefield terrain to neutralize the effects of American technology while maximizing the remarkable light infantry skills of his own soldiers. Only Honeycutt's drive and determination kept his battalion fighting despite crippling losses, sagging morale, bad press, and crushing pressure from his chain of command. His strength of wil1 (with support from Conmy and Zais) overcame every adversity the terrain, weather, enemy, and fate could heap on him and helped him see the battle through to a successful conclusion.

NOTES

1. Samuel Zaffiri, Hamburger Hi& May 1i--2Q, 1969 (Novato, CA: Presidia Press, 19&g), 1,
2. Ibid., 186. Hamburger Hill was so-named because the soldiers said the mountain "turned men into hamburger" during the battle.
3. Ibid., 48-50.
4. Ibid., 49-50.
5. Ibid., 58.
6. Ibid., 70-74.
7. Ibid., 2%.
8. Ibid., 81.
9. Ibid., 83.
10. Ibid., 95.
11. Ibid., 118, 131.
12. ZafEri, 208. The shelling also produced'tbe undesired side effect of grinding the west face of the mountain into a "giant mud slough" up which the 31187th Infantry had to crawl.
13. Honeycutt controlled both of the final two assaults fkom a Eight observation helicopter.

14. Zaffiri, 148.
15. Ibid., 177.
16. Ibid., I7&--77.
17. Ibid., 204.
lg. Ibid., 2a7.
19. Tbe~501stInfantrywas flotin in 800 metersnortheast ofthe sumtnitand2i3dARVN 1,QOOmeters to the southeast of the mountain.
20. ZaEri, 4. The artillery fired 2 1,732 rounds throughout the battle.
21. Ciuenter Lewy, Alrrerica in Fktnatn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 144.
22. Zaffiri, 244.